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U. S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
U. S. FOOD DISTRIBUTION ADMINISTRATION
MARKETING REPORTS DIVISION
SOUTHERN REGION

April 20, 1943

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U. S. Department of Agriculture

LET'S WRITE BETTER MARKET NEWS REPORTS!

No market news reporter needs to be told the value of accuracy and speed in preparing his releases. He knows an inaccurate report is worse than no report at all. He has probably experienced the embarrassment caused by an inadvertent error, and will exercise every possible care to avoid errors traceable to carelessness. He will not release reports based on inadequate information or baseless rumors. He knows, too, that accurate information is valueless if not distributed in time for use. He works under the pressure of time to meet radio and newspaper deadlines and to get market information to the wire services.

Nor does the market news reporter need to be reminded that a report will be more effective if it is terse and well-written. Right now, though, when we are all keenly interested in better distribution of market news information, is a good time to review some of the points that will help to give our reports better journalistic style. Here are a few:

BE CONCISE BUT CLEAR

The value of a report is not judged by its length, but by its content and quality. Eliminate all superfluous words. Say "in 1941," not "in the year of 1941." Say "total effect," not "total effect of all this"; "continue to," not "still continue to"; "moderate," not "about moderate."

"Moderate to light receipts that arrived today" should be "Moderate to light receipts." If they were receipts, they arrived.

Make "Stocks were reported as reaching a dangerously low point" read "Stocks approached a dangerously low point."

"A two weeks' period of cold weather" is "two weeks of cold weather."

"Marketings were composed of" can be briefed to "Marketings consisted of," or "Marketings comprised."

"Growers received" is better than "Growers were paid."

Make one word do the work of two. Guard against over-use of such words as "that," "which," "the," "market," etc. Numerous "thats" can be deleted with an improvement in terseness and clarity. Adding "ing" to many words frequently will save the time and space of two words. Example: "Demand prevailing at southern markets this week," instead of "Demand that prevailed at southern markets this week." "Bringing" will substitute for "which brought"; "increasing to" for "resulting in an increase to," etc.

Splitting one long sentence into two or more short sentences will eliminate "which," "where," "however," and such words. Long, involved sentences are one of the worst faults in government writing. But one short sentence after another makes your report jerky and choppy. Vary the length of sentences to effect smoothness.

Except in radio scripts, avoid repetition of phrases or comment. Commas can substitute for the word "and" in countless cases without sacrifice of clarity.

And while we're talking about clarity, don't forget that an error just as bad as using too many words is to omit words needed to make your meaning clear or your sentences smooth. Example: "Cattle in fresh receipts were small volume" would be better changed to read: "Today's receipts of cattle were of small volume." "The trade was as active as ever and stronger for two days" is not clear. Change "Light haulings of celery were slow and slightly weaker" to "Celery haulings were light, demand slow, and prices slightly weaker."

BE SPECIFIC

Government writers are accused of using too many generalities and hedging too much, thereby obscuring what they have to say. Reading difficulty is increased by too many conditional clauses and phrases, such as "on the whole it may be said," "under the circumstances," etc. Investigators estimate that government officials use at least one prepositional phrase to every four words, whereas good writing contains only one prepositional phrase to every eleven words. Phrases built around "it was reported" are especially overused.

At the same time, avoid broad claims that cannot be substantiated. Such superlatives as "all," "best," "worst," "largest," "finest," etc. are almost sure to make trouble if someone takes the pains to question your statement. Qualify "all" to "most" or maybe "virtually all." You can usually say "one of the best; largest, finest, etc." "Practically" and "generally" have been so overworked that it is a good idea to find other qualifiers, where possible. "Largely" and "mostly" are also overused. You can sometimes avoid them by using "most" or "most of." Example: "Most surplus supplies have been exhausted" instead of "Surplus supplies have been largely exhausted."

Be sure to state the basis of quotations used so that your readers will have no doubt as to whether they are wholesale, retail, carlot, etc.

MAKE YOUR REPORTS INTERESTING

Remember that we are collecting and preparing information mainly for the benefit of the producer; but keep in mind, too, the trade, the consumer, and the general public. Unless you are trying to reach a strictly trade audience, translate technical terms and "shop words" into good understandable English. It is not the five-dollar word that puts your message across, but the two-bit variety rightly used. Many of your readers will not fully understand the specialized language of the traders in the market place and of the economic analysts in Government and business. Especially avoid the use of a trade term that is ambiguous or that has a different meaning for different groups of readers.

To be interesting, a report must be well-written and grammatically correct. It must read smoothly. Hackneyed, overworked expressions must be eliminated. The following tips may help:

Don't overuse abstract nouns like "condition," "data," "situation," "development," "problem," "factor," "position," "basis," "case," etc.

Avoid the use of passive tenses and indirect phrases. For example: "Tobacco sold on the Virginia fire-cured markets this week showed a downward trend" is better than "A downward trend was indicated for the tobacco sold on the Virginia fire-cured markets this week."

As in all good prose writing, it is advisable to use verbs that denote action.

All parts of the verb "to be" are much overworked. "Point out," "indicate," and "reveal" are also weak, overused verbs.

Avoid beginning a series of sentences with "The," "It is," and "There are," and their variants ruin the opening of many good paragraphs.

Avoid frequent repetition of words, especially in the same sentence. Example: "Production of many items continued heavy compared with production last year, but current offerings continued scarce." Make this read: "Production continued heavy compared with output last year, but current offerings remained scarce," or better still, "Production continued heavier than last year, but current offerings remained scarce." In "Trading was active despite the release of OPA price ceilings, according to a report released by the Food Distribution Administration," "announcement" could be substituted for "release" in the first line.

Get all the subject matter of a sentence together at the beginning. Change "Demand continued active at southern markets during the past week for practically all classes of farm products" to read: "Demand for most farm products continued active at southern markets during the past week." "Marketings showed a higher general average this week for the Eastern District Fire-cured tobacco sales" should read: "Eastern District fire-cured tobacco sales brought a higher general average price this week." "This week's quotations remained about the same as last week's for heavy and thin leaf grades sold on the Virginia fire-cured tobacco markets; whereas prices for lugs were slightly higher" would be better changed to "On the Virginia fire-cured tobacco markets, quotations for heavy and thin leaf grades remained about unchanged, but lugs were slightly higher."

Watch the use of the conjunctions "and" and "but." Where a contrast is indicated, "but" will emphasize the comparison and make the statement more effective.

Don't use "due to" when you mean "because of," "balance" for "rest," "over" for "more than," or "less than" for "fewer than" (in referring to numbers).

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"While" refers to time and should be avoided as a lazy connective word in sentences that do not carry the time thought.

Do not use the preposition "through" in place of "with" or "of." Don't use "on" and "of" interchangeably.

"Very" is sometimes confusing. It may either limit or emphasize. Be sure it does what you intend it to do.

Get modifying words, phrases, and clauses in their right place. "Only" is a good example. The sentence "The market closed weak with choice lots only bringing \$15.25" is ambiguous. It could read: "only choice lots bringing \$15.25," or "choice lots bringing only \$15.25." Balance modifiers in such sentences as "Dealers report a very heavy demand and offerings negligible." Make it read: "Dealers report a very heavy demand and negligible offerings." Better still "Dealers report a heavy demand for negligible offerings."

In narrative reports always write out the words "per cent" instead of using the per cent sign. The sign may be used in tabulations, however.

And don't use too many "howevers." Alternate with "though" and other synonyms.

PUNCTUATE

Many sentences in market news reports are not clear because of lack of adequate punctuation. We have leaned over backward to avoid the "comma habit," and some of our sentences have gotten to look as if we didn't quite understand them ourselves, so were afraid to try to punctuate them.

Here's a sentence (unnecessarily involved, for punctuation illustration purposes only) that may help fix in your mind the rules for using commas:

When the plan is completed, (comma after introductory clauses or phrases) the work, too, (parenthetical words set off by commas) will be under way; (semi-colon between parts of conjunctive sentence when the sentence parts themselves are complete sentences broken up by punctuation) but the program (no comma here) that it covers, (but comma before specific "which" or other modifying words) which Doe insisted upon having worked out in detail, (comma also closing such modifying matter) will not be in full effect until years of tillage, rotation, seeding, and stubble-mulching (commas between words in a series) have passed.

MAKE YOUR REPORT NEAT

Don't overcrowd a mimeographed page. Instead, spend a little time in condensing your material. This will probably result in an improvement in style anyway.

Check stencils carefully for typographical errors. Encourage typists to take pains to cut stencils that will print clearly. Insist that duplicating equipment be kept in good condition. Instruct mailing room clerks to eliminate smudgy or poorly printed copies, and under no circumstances let a two-page report

with a blank on one side go out!

The appearance of reports consisting mainly of statistics or other tabulated material is greatly improved when each new heading is begun on a separate line. The more blank space on a page, the easier it is to read.

KEEP IN MIND ALWAYS THE AIM OF MARKET REPORTS

It is: To facilitate the flow of commodities to markets where they are most needed and to place farmers and dealers on an equal bargaining basis. While the quotation of prices is the most emphasized phase of the work, information on price-making forces is also important in regulating the flow of commodities to market. Include information on crop conditions and prospects, intentions to plant, storage holdings, and competing commodities. To set off a statistical report, a short narrative resume preceding the tabulation is effective.

Our reports are the written word of the Department of Agriculture; by them it is judged. Let us, therefore, be alert to build vocabulary, to hunt always for the simple but right word, to review grammar and rhetoric, and to develop an effective style. If we cannot make our reports entertaining, we can at least make them interesting, whether they're mimeographed for a mailing list, written in press release form for a newspaper, or in a conversational tone for radio.

--We frankly admit having plagiarized
most of this material.

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